

## BACKGROUND

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# Significant Policy Changes Needed to Meet Mass Deportation Goals

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### KEY TAKEAWAYS

The Trump Administration is significantly off pace to meet the President's promise for the largest deportation operation in American history.

The DHS does not produce immigration-enforcement statistics—without them it is impossible to ascertain how the DHS supports its varying deportation numbers.

Policy changes and strategic deployment of increased resources from the One Big Beautiful Bill could get the Administration on track for far more deportations.

The Trump Administration is substantially off pace to “carry out the largest deportation operation in American history.”<sup>1</sup> President Donald Trump set the goal for his Administration to exceed President Dwight Eisenhower’s 1954 deportation program.<sup>2</sup>

### Eisenhower Administration Statistical Overview

In 1954 the Eisenhower Administration carried out an unprecedented deportation surge.<sup>3</sup> The operation responded to widespread problems from lack of compliance with a 1951 agreement between Mexico and the United States, one of a series of similar programs between 1942 and 1964, known as the Mexican Agricultural Labor Program or, colloquially, as the Bracero Program (*bracero* being Spanish for manual laborer).<sup>4</sup>

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at <https://report.heritage.org/bg3941>

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The Bracero Program matched 2 million seasonal agricultural workers from Mexico with American employers over the 1942-to-1964 series of agreements.<sup>5</sup> Despite this program, illegal immigration from Mexico into the United States continued at unacceptable rates, including braceros who stayed beyond their temporary labor approval.

According to Immigration and Naturalization Service (INS) government statistics, Eisenhower's operation resulted in 1.1 million illegal aliens leaving the United States in 1954.<sup>6</sup> That 1.1 million number is split into two main categories. The 1955 *Annual Report of the Immigration and Naturalization Service* states that 26,951 aliens were formally deported and that the remaining 1,074,227 aliens departed voluntarily. The voluntary departure figure includes individuals apprehended by the INS who then opted for voluntary departure as well as individuals who left without being apprehended. There is no clean statistical breakdown of that number between those two categories.

Estimates of the total illegal alien population in the 1950s are difficult to come by for several reasons. Data collection was limited, and border apprehensions drove what little data were collected or estimated. Nevertheless, the 1955 INS *Annual Report* referenced "nebulous estimates made at various times which set the number of such illegal residents at between 2,000,000 and 5,000,000" while arguing that "the actual number is unquestionably less."<sup>7</sup>

For the sake of the rough approximation inherent in comparing datasets poorly suited for apples-to-apples comparison, the focus here is the good-faith middle ground of the estimates that the INS criticized, resulting in an estimate of 3.5 million total illegal aliens in the United States prior to Eisenhower's deportation program. According to these figures, the operation resulted in a 31 percent decrease in total illegal alien population through deportation, voluntary return, or self-deportation in 1954 alone.

## President Trump 2025 Statistical Overview

According to a September 23, 2025, Department of Homeland Security (DHS) press release, the government claims that 2 million illegals have left the U.S. since Donald Trump returned to the presidency.<sup>8</sup> Of that 2 million figure, the Trump Administration reports that 1.6 million have voluntarily self-deported and immigration officials have executed more than 400,000 deportations. The press release projects that the "Trump administration is on pace to shatter historic records and deport nearly 600,000 illegal aliens by the end of President Trump's first year since returning to office." Yet, the press release is not accompanied by any supporting data.

A month after the September release, the DHS told Fox News that 515,000 illegal aliens have been deported since President Trump took office for the second time.<sup>9</sup> That number would account for a 115,000 increase in a one-month period. The DHS also maintained that the Administration was still on track for deporting 600,000 illegal aliens by the end of President Trump's first year. If the DHS truly registered 115,000 deportations in one month, and that rate could be expected to be repeated, then the year-end projection should rise to at least 700,000.

Complicating the lack of statistical consistency, on August 28, 2025, an unnamed senior DHS official told CNN that U.S. Immigration and Customs Enforcement (ICE) had deported 200,000 illegal aliens at that moment in time, with deportations by the U.S. Customs and Border Protection (CBP) and the Coast Guard, as well as self-deportations, accounting for another 150,000.<sup>10</sup> That total of 350,000 in August compared to a purported 2 million in September can only be explained by a major change in methodology or reporting. The DHS has not shared any statistics on how many people have used the CBP One application (now CBP Home) for self-deportation with monetary incentives for deportable aliens to leave the United States voluntarily.<sup>11</sup>

The Trump Administration has not released monthly data on immigration enforcement since President Trump took office.<sup>12</sup> Such data were routinely released monthly in previous Administrations and contain specific data on various aspects of ICE enforcement actions. Without access to the data, it is impossible to ascertain how the DHS is supporting its varying claims of deportation and self-deportation numbers. There is no reason to believe that ICE stopped collecting the data. The CBP, another DHS component, continues to produce detailed data on border encounters, seizures, enforcement actions, and other fields regularly.<sup>13</sup>

Current estimates of the illegal population in the United States wildly vary, with 14 million being the consensus low-end estimate used by most policymakers.<sup>14</sup> President Trump has estimated a higher number at 21 million.<sup>15</sup> The Trump Administration's estimation of 600,000 deportations by year-end would account for a 4.2 percent deportation rate of the low end of the estimated total illegal alien population, and a 2.9 percent rate based on the higher Trump estimate. If self-deportation estimates could be credibly supported, then the deportation rate could be supplemented to arrive at a larger overall number of illegal aliens that have left the United States. Still, it is unlikely that even a credibly supported calculation of self-deportations would come close to 1954 levels of total illegal aliens that left the United States.

## Statistical Comparison

Illegal immigration statistics are inherently difficult to quantify and changes in methodology and categorization over the decades have made comparisons over different time periods even more difficult. This attempt to compare 1954 immigration enforcement to 2025 is likewise difficult, but the large trends are undeniable. Based on taking estimates of total illegal population that were criticized by the government in 1954 for being *too high* and then modern estimates of total illegal immigration population in 2025 that are criticized for being *too low*, one can approximate a general comparison that can be fairly criticized as being biased toward inflating today's enforcement levels. Even on that favorable ground, 1954 enforcement levels dwarf modern levels: In 1954 the government caused 31 percent of the total illegal population to leave the United States, in 2025 only 4.2 percent.

To achieve the President's mandate, all parts of the Trump Administration need to substantially scale up enforcement activities. This is possible given the infusion of \$45 billion to ICE with the One Big Beautiful Bill and by removing existing policy restrictions that are artificially limiting immigration enforcement.

To best understand how the Trump Administration can meet its goal and expectations, it is necessary to understand how the Eisenhower Administration achieved success in 1954.

## Eisenhower Immigration Enforcement Background

A 2006 *Western Historical Quarterly* article by Kelly Lytle Hernández contains helpful historical context for the ramp-up of President Eisenhower's deportation program.<sup>16</sup> Inspiration for the operation can be found in the leadership of Border Patrol Inspector Albert Quillin who is credited with devising the strategy. Early in the mornings of 1950, Quillin convened a team of a dozen border patrol officials with buses, trucks, automobiles, and even a plane and then gave maps of an area in south Texas and instructions to apprehend as many illegal aliens as possible. In just four days, the team of a dozen apprehended more than 1,000 people. Border Patrol stations throughout the Southwest began implementing the same strategy. To scale up deportation processing, the Border Patrol converted locations, such as a tomato warehouse, into temporary detention facilities.

In April 1954, President Eisenhower appointed retired General Joseph Swing to the position of commissioner of the INS. President Eisenhower had previously rejected a proposal to militarize immigration enforcement

activities in fear of violating the Posse Comitatus Act, which generally prohibits the use of the military for domestic law enforcement purposes. The appointment of General Swing was a compromise to bring military tactics to federal immigration enforcement without deploying the actual military.

In May 1954, the United States, in concert with Mexico, formally announced the operation, drawing from the model popularized by Quillin and scaling up and advertising those efforts. Like the U.S., Mexico then had an interest in compliance with the tenets of the Bracero Program and policing unsanctioned migration from Mexico. General Swing organized the Border Patrol into units of a dozen men, drawing from Quillin's tactics, and deployed them to the Southwest United States to apprehend illegal aliens for deportation. The government reported more than 1 million deportations in 1954. Critics of the effort point to a drop off to 254,096 apprehensions in 1955 as evidence that the operation was unsuccessful in curbing illegal immigration over the long term. What is more likely is that the 1954 enforcement announcement was more a publicity campaign of implementing existing tactics at scale. That the tactics of the operation resulted in much larger apprehension and deportation numbers than any previous year is itself not in question.<sup>17</sup>

General Swing's 1954 report to Congress provides further insights into the simple tactics deployed during the operation.<sup>18</sup> He described an example of one task force's operation:

When the task force went into action, they used a system of blocking off an area and mopping it up. Gradually they enlarged the operation until it embraced the industrial and agricultural areas of the entire state of California. Their forced departure resulted in a drop in weekly unemployment claims in the State amounting to some \$325,000.<sup>19</sup>

Swing also explained how due process was provided to the aliens upon deportation:

Before each bus load of aliens left the United States, a Border Patrolman gave them an informal talk in the Spanish language. Clearly and concisely, he explained to the aliens the reason for repatriation. They were advised that in the future their only opportunity to enter the United States was to be by legal means. Following this, there was a brief period during which they might ask questions pertinent to their status.<sup>20</sup>

He also added that increased enforcement was met with increased self-deportation:

As news of the operation of the Special Force spread, unknown thousands left the country voluntarily to avoid arrest and transfer to the interior of Mexico.... These voluntary departures, an important factor in overall planning, were given impetus when the Commissioner, during the week preceding the drive, announced over the radio and through the press that the [illegal alien] population was to be removed. Employers were urged to arrange for contract labor, and most of them did so.<sup>21</sup>

Media coverage at the time emphasized the success. A 1955 article in *The Californian* said that the operation “greatly eases the economic and social problems and curtails the cost of public welfare, crime and diseases.”<sup>22</sup>

## President Trump Invokes Eisenhower-Era Goals for Deportations

President Trump’s campaign for the presidency in 2024 and his first year back in office have been marked by consistent references to the Eisenhower Administration’s deportation program. Most notably, President Trump’s Agenda 47, which outlined his 20 campaign promises, boldly listed as campaign promise number two to “carry out the largest deportation in America history.”<sup>23</sup>

Throughout President Trump’s campaign he invoked Eisenhower’s 1954 operation. In September 2023, at a rally in Iowa, then-candidate Trump declared: “Following the Eisenhower model, we will carry out the largest deportation operation in American history. We have no choice. We’re not going to have a country.”<sup>24</sup>

These promises remained consistent throughout the campaign. In an April 12, 2024, interview with *Time* magazine, Trump provided more detail on the Eisenhower comparison:

So, if you look back into the 1950s, Dwight Eisenhower, he’s not known for that, you know, you don’t think of him that way. Because you see...Dwight Eisenhower was very big on illegal immigration not coming into our country. And he did a massive deportation of people. He was doing it for a long time. He got very proficient at it. He was bringing them just to the other side of the border. And they would be back in the country within a matter of days. And then he started bringing them 3,000 miles away.<sup>25</sup>

At the 2024 Republican National Convention, Trump declared, “The Republican platform promises to launch the largest deportation operation in the history of the country.”<sup>26</sup>

President Trump has remained consistent on this promise to the present day. In his March 4, 2025, address to a joint session of Congress, while promoting the One Big Beautiful Bill, President Trump said:

I have sent Congress a detailed funding request laying out exactly how we will eliminate these threats to protect our homeland and complete the largest deportation operation in American history—larger even than current record-holder President Dwight D. Eisenhower.<sup>27</sup>

## Comparing the Eisenhower Program to the Trump Program

Many aspects make comparison of the Eisenhower era to the Trump era difficult. The legal and regulatory requirements in 2025 are much more restrictive for enforcement actions than they were 70 years ago. Additionally, Eisenhower-era enforcement encountered higher concentrations of illegal aliens in the Southwestern United States, who primarily engaged in agricultural work, whereas today, illegal aliens are located throughout the U.S. and across labor sectors.

While the limiting external factors can explain many things, the Trump Administration does have some advantages that the Eisenhower Administration did not. For instance, with the passage of President Trump's One Big Beautiful Bill, the number of enforcement agents and resources is many degrees higher than it was for President Eisenhower. There are also several technological advantages today that would have been coveted in 1954. Most significantly, the policy differences between the Eisenhower Administration and the Trump Administration are critical.

## Prioritization Problem

The starkest difference between the two Administrations is the matter of prioritization, or conversely, the Trump Administration's focus on smaller, select illegal populations that require more specialized resources to apprehend and deport. The Eisenhower program prioritized quantity, whereas the Trump program can be described as putting a higher premium on quality of deportations in focusing on illegal aliens with serious or extensive criminal records.

The Eisenhower program was fairly blunt in how it went about enforcement, using a "system of blocking off an area and mopping it up."<sup>28</sup> This is what would be known today as large-scale work-site enforcement. Yet, the Trump Administration has focused on criminal illegal alien enforcement as a priority as opposed to sustained large-scale worksite enforcement.

Proponents of immigration enforcement have long recognized the importance of worksite enforcement. The 1994 interim report of the U.S. Commission on Immigration Reform, led by retired Democratic Representative Barbara Jordan (TX) succinctly stated:

The Commission believes that reducing the employment magnet is the linchpin of a comprehensive strategy to reduce illegal immigration. The ineffectiveness of employer sanctions, prevalence of fraudulent documents, and continued high numbers of unauthorized workers, combined with confusion for employers and reported discrimination against employees, have challenged the credibility of current worksite enforcement efforts.<sup>29</sup>

Yet, the Department of Homeland Security has been publicly prioritizing the pursuit of the “worst of the worst” criminal aliens so far this year, which is resource intensive. Definitionally, it involves a much smaller sub-section of the total deportable population. In 2024, ICE told Congress that it had 662,566 noncitizens with criminal histories on the ICE national docket.<sup>30</sup> Additionally, criminal alien prioritization requires more operational resources to target, plan, and coordinate with law enforcement and deal with resistant tactics of locals in sanctuary jurisdictions, not to mention Antifa violence against, and obstruction of, ICE agents.

The degree of immigration enforcement prioritization has been a contentious political issue for decades. Prioritization measures first appeared in the immigration enforcement context as a statutory priority in the 1986 Immigration Reform and Control Act, which required the Attorney General “in the case of an alien who is convicted of an offense which makes the alien subject to deportation...[to] begin any deportation proceeding as expeditiously as possible after the date of the conviction.”<sup>31</sup>

In November 2000, INS Commissioner Doris Meissner issued a memorandum emphasizing that members of the agency were not only authorized but expected to exercise discretion at all stages of the immigration enforcement process.<sup>32</sup> She proceeded to introduce a series of variables that weighed in favor of exercising discretion to *not* proceed with immigration enforcement. In that list she included assessing an illegal alien’s criminal record and any evidence of rehabilitation.

In June 2012, ICE Director John Morton issued a memorandum ordering ICE agents and officers to use “prosecutorial discretion” to discourage deportation of illegal aliens who entered the United States as children to “prevent these low priority individuals from being placed into removal proceedings or removed from the United States.” The Morton memo also

deprioritized aliens who do “not otherwise pose a threat to national security or public safety.”<sup>33</sup> This public safety, or “worst of the worst,” priority as it has come to be labeled, has resulted in redirecting and limiting enforcement resources and operations.

In 2014, DHS Secretary Jeh Johnson expanded the scope of prosecutorial discretion, increasing the types of deportable grounds for which ICE should *not* take action.<sup>34</sup> Specifically, the memo stated that national security, border security, and public safety threats should be the top priority for enforcement resources, aliens with three or more misdemeanors or a “significant misdemeanor” should be the second priority, and the lowest priority were aliens who had been issued a final order of removal on or after January 2014. But the Obama Administration provided exceptions to enforcing immigration laws in all three of these prioritization categories. For example, Secretary Johnson expressly excused ICE inaction for the third priority, stating, “unless, in the judgement of an immigration officer, the alien is not a threat to the integrity of the immigration system or there are factors suggesting the alien should not be an enforcement priority.” Immigration enforcement was the exception rather than the rule, ignoring the laws passed by Congress.

The first Trump Administration generally withdrew formal policies that limited enforcement but continued operational focus on criminal populations. Worksite enforcement during President Trump’s first term was nearly unheard of. The Biden Administration reinstated and even exceeded the Obama enforcement priority limitations, including an attempted 100-day deportation pause.<sup>35</sup> In articulating the Biden Administration’s strategy, DHS Secretary Alejandro Mayorkas announced in September 2021 that “[e]nforcement priorities for apprehension and removal remain focused on noncitizens who are a threat to our national security, public safety, and border security.”<sup>36</sup> In January 2022, Secretary Mayorkas boasted to the U.S. Conference of Mayors:

Unlawful presence in the United States will alone not be a basis for an immigration enforcement action but rather, we will allocate our efforts, we will allocate our resources on those individuals who present a current public safety threat, a threat to national security, or a threat to our border security, and that is a very important principle.<sup>37</sup>

## A Path Forward

In order to significantly increase the deportations of illegal aliens, the DHS can do three specific things:

1. **Focus ICE on Immigration Enforcement, Not General Law Enforcement.** By focusing on the “worst of the worst,” President Trump’s DHS is, in effect, continuing the prioritization policy of the Clinton, Obama, and Biden Administrations. Indeed, the Trump Administration has inherited an environment with many serious public safety and national security concerns from the record illegal alien population that entered the United States due to the Biden Administration’s willful policies. Notwithstanding the introduction of these threats through President Biden’s open borders and abuse of the immigration system, the United States is traditionally situated and resourced to deal with national security and crime issues through non-immigration enforcement agencies and actions such as policing, the criminal justice system, and national security agencies. The role of the immigration enforcement system is to enforce immigration law and was not designed as a tool to duplicate law enforcement functions dedicated to these other matters.
2. **Remove Priority Language from the Budget and Guiding Documents.** This institutional drift toward limiting enforcement through prioritization is surprisingly reflected in the fiscal year (FY) 2026 DHS Congressional Budget Justification (CBJ), which quietly reintroduces “priority” language nearly identical to the rescinded Mayorkas memo. The CBJ states that ICE will prioritize the removal of aliens who pose a threat to national security, border security, and public safety,<sup>38</sup> while omitting any reference to Executive Order 14159, signed by President Trump in January 2025.<sup>39</sup> That executive order explicitly revoked all Biden-era enforcement guidance and mandated enforcement against all inadmissible and removable aliens.

The FY 2026 CBJ’s omission is especially notable because President Trump’s first-term CBJs (FY 2018–FY 2020) explicitly cited Executive Order 13768 of 2017, which directed broad enforcement without categorical limitations. By contrast, Biden-era CBJs (FY 2023–FY 2025) cited the Mayorkas prioritization memo as controlling guidance. The failure of the FY 2026 document to reference Executive Order 14159 of 2025 breaks from the Trump-era precedent and represents a subtle but serious reversion to selective-enforcement language—an internal resistance that Congress must correct through clear directives reaffirming full-spectrum enforcement authority.

3. **Dramatically Increase Worksite Enforcement.** The current Trump Administration has been much more aggressive in its communications to encourage deportable aliens to leave the U.S., highlight the criminals who DHS is deporting, correct the media's intentional misrepresentations and omissions, and to defend ICE agents. Nevertheless, worksite enforcement remains rare, and the message sent to officers and agents in the field is that the limitation of enforcement by the establishment of criminal alien priorities is still in effect.

Limiting the scope of immigration enforcement through a prioritization policy will prevent the Trump Administration from even marginally approaching Eisenhower-era levels of deportations. Only through large-scale worksite enforcement and a focus on the quantity of deportations can the numbers begin to materially increase.

Special interest groups, such as in agriculture and hospitality, will continue to increase their lobbying efforts to keep enforcement priority restrictions as current operational policy. This dynamic was on display earlier in June 2025, when ICE Homeland Security Investigations (HSI) abruptly instructed field offices to pause all planned worksite operations targeting farms, hotels, and restaurants, citing economic and public relations sensitivities.<sup>40</sup> After internal backlash from immigration officials who were caught off guard and public pressure on the Trump Administration, the order was rescinded days later, with the DHS announcing that “full-scope enforcement” would resume. The pause reportedly stemmed from pressure by the Department of Agriculture, which argued that raids on food-production and hospitality employers could disrupt labor supply chains.<sup>41</sup>

Similar issues with embracing worksite enforcement were apparent in early September, when ICE's multi-agency raid on a Hyundai-linked supplier facility in Georgia sparked intense political and media blowback.<sup>42</sup> Following revelations of underage illegal alien labor, the agency faced immediate criticism from some Republican offices and senior White House advisors concerned about optics and economic disruption. Rather than amplifying the success, the operation was quietly downplayed. President Trump recently stated to reporters on his trip to Japan that he was “very much opposed to” the Hyundai worksite raid due to the needed technical expertise of the Korean employees.<sup>43</sup> These reactions reinforce a pattern in which legitimate enforcement

against large employers is framed as “anti-industry” rather than an enforcement necessity.

These incidents underscore a political driver of limiting enforcement actions through prioritization policies. Until those artificial limits are stripped away and worksite enforcement is treated as the necessary feature of a mass deportation agenda, the Trump Administration will remain structurally constrained from replicating the operational scale of Eisenhower’s 1954 effort.

## Increased Enforcement to Encourage Self-Deportation

Both the Eisenhower and Trump deportation programs have relied on public communication to influence illegal alien behavior and encourage self-deportation. The key difference between the two is that the Eisenhower Administration was able to deport large numbers of illegal aliens, which set expectations amongst remaining illegal aliens that self-deporting was in their best interest. An effective self-deportation strategy requires pairing it with a large-scale enforcement strategy to influence an alien’s risk calculus and compliance. Deportable aliens are more likely to leave on their own if the risk of DHS apprehension and deportation is high and their ability to return to the U.S. in the future is low or nil.

So far, this DHS has attempted to portray a high risk of deportation and a permanent bar from returning to the U.S. without the corresponding significant increase in the likelihood of deportation for the vast majority of deportable aliens. With no transparency into how many aliens are using the CBP Home app, which comes with cash incentives, for self-deportation, it is difficult to conclude that many deportable aliens are self-deporting through that program. This is despite a \$200 million public relations campaign to advertise the initiative, most prominently on English-speaking Fox News.<sup>44</sup> English advertisements with Spanish subtitles have appeared during Mexican soccer league coverage and on Univision.

Until the Trump Administration, like the Eisenhower Administration, can increase apprehensions and deportations, the rates of self-deportation will continue to remain low due to the perceived low risk of removal among the deportable population.

## Conclusion

While the Trump Administration is significantly off pace to meet the President’s goal of the largest deportation operation in American history,

there are immediate policy changes that could correct the situation. Also working in the Trump Administration's favor is the \$45 billion infusion for the effort by virtue of the One Big Beautiful Bill. Those resources must be allocated quickly toward an immigration enforcement infrastructure and communications strategy that is not limited by prioritization policies. To build public confidence in immigration enforcement operations and inform policymakers for legislative support, the DHS should consistently make data on all aspects of immigration enforcement public.

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